

who believed that conquests in Tibet would give them personal prestige and power, rather than Sichuan-ists who wanted to build, or to safeguard the province. But if so, why did the conquest of Tibetan lands become one of the premier achievements for a provincial official's résumé, especially given that the central government was apparently lukewarm about expansion? It is not really a failing of Wang's book that he has not answered these questions; on the contrary, part of the strength of the book is that has raised them.

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*Feldpostbriefe aus China: Wahrnehmungs- und Deutungsmuster deutscher Soldaten zur Zeit des Boxeraufstandes 1900/1901.*

DIETLIND WÜNSCHE

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Whereas the older Western literature on the Boxer Uprising of 1900 dealt primarily with the origins of the Boxer movement, its anti-missionary and anti-Christian excesses, as well the siege of the foreign legations in Beijing, more recent scholarly works have focused on the so-called "Boxer War." This tragic military conflict, which shook the entire world in the summer of 1900, is deemed to have started on 17 June 1900 with the capture of the Dagou forts near Tianjin by foreign forces, followed by the Qing imperial court's declaration of war on the powers four days later. It is customary to divide the bloody encounter between the soldiers of the Imperial Chinese Army and the Boxer irregulars who believed themselves to be invulnerable to foreign bullets, on the one hand, and the invading troops marching under eight different flags, on the other, into two major phases. The first phase ended on 14 August with the relief of the legations in Beijing and the looting of Chinese national treasures by the foreign troops in its immediate aftermath. The second, considerably longer phase consisted of often brutal reprisal campaigns in Zhili province by soldiers of the Eight Power Expeditionary Force, most of whom had arrived in North China after the siege of Beijing had been lifted.

In the book under review, Dietlind Wünsche sheds light on a hitherto ignored aspect of the Boxer War. In order to determine how the war was perceived and portrayed by German participants in the destructive expeditions into the Chinese countryside to "punish" what were claimed to be "Boxer" cities, towns and villages, she has assembled and analysed a remarkable collection of letters sent from the front (*Feldpostbriefe*) by soldiers to their families back in Germany, supplemented by private diaries and official war journals. Such sources have in recent times been explored with regard to the First and Second World Wars, but they have not been consulted in connection with the Boxer War. It is Wünsche's overall conclusion that the soldiers, mostly lower- and middle-ranking officers, justify as necessary the harsh treatment of presumptive "Boxers" as well as ordinary Chinese civilians, arguing in their letters that leniency would undermine the military objectives of the campaigns.

In order to understand the soldiers' mentality, the author devotes considerable space to the historical context at the time of the Boxer War. Whereas her discussion of the Chinese background to the Boxer episode relies too heavily on dated studies, some of them still coloured by past ideological battles, Wünsche's handling of the

German situation in the late 1890s is rather more successful. She convincingly explains the changing political climate in the German empire that encouraged the rise of militarism and favoured a colonial project supported by ideas of social Darwinianism and Europe's civilizing mission. Moreover, the author points out that Germany was assuming a more active role in international politics at this time. The Kaiser and his military supporters saw the Boxer War, Germany's first overseas military venture, as an excellent opportunity to garner prestige and glory. To some extent these currents motivated soldiers to volunteer for service in the East Asia Expeditionary Corps. Given their meagre knowledge of China, perhaps inadequately informed by the growing travel literature, it is not surprising that the soldiers were convinced of China's backwardness.

In a useful section at the end of her final chapter, the author presents some Chinese eyewitness accounts of the traumatic events of 1900. While the brutal encounters are reported in both the Chinese and German sources, their interpretations are naturally at variance. It is also clear that German forces played a prominent role in the punitive expeditions: of the 76 expeditions authorized by the allied supreme commander, 51 were undertaken by German troops. Because Wünsche focuses exclusively on the German contingent in the Boxer War, we are not told whether the behaviour of German soldiers was unique among the allied forces. What kind of perception patterns and interpretive paradigms were, for example, produced by Russian, British or French participants – including their colonial troops – in connection with the events of 1900–01? It should be pointed out, though, that the author does not subscribe to the argument that the violence perpetrated by German soldiers during the Boxer War was a harbinger of the later atrocities in German South-West Africa and during the two world wars.

Dietlind Wünsche has effectively woven meaningful passages from the soldiers' reports into her essentially chronological account of the Boxer War. Moreover, she has transcribed a large collection of private letters in the appendix of the book, thereby making rare primary sources available to a wider readership. Her detailed account is a valuable contribution to the growing body of Boxer studies.

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